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ABSTRACT

This presentation chronicles the development of a professional conference of Maryland's Hagerstown Community College (HCC) faculty and secondary teachers from the Washington County Public School (WCPS) system. The conference began with a vision in the HCC Faculty Assembly, was planned and implemented by a steering committee of faculty and staff from HCC and the secondary discipline supervisors from WCPS, and involved over 1,100 educators in a collaborative program of over 25 discipline-based sessions on the HCC campus. The infrastructure and organization developed for this project will serve as a foundation for providing a connected and smooth continuum of educational resources from middle school through the baccalaureate degree. Representatives of the steering committee from both the college and the secondary school disciplines will present the theoretical, logistical, and practical aspects of this conference and its implications. The report defines the learning community envisioned by HCC: a community of scholars and their students learning from and with one another. It identifies the goals of establishing a collaborative professional development activity for all teachers from high school through HCC; teacher-teacher communication network; student-student (WCPS-HCC) communication network; faculty-faculty team to meet and work on placement testing, problems with the Student Outcomes Assessment Report, and developmental education at HCC; and curriculum-based projects. (VWC)

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Creating a Learning Community

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CREATING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This presentation chronicles the development of a professional conference of Hagerstown Community College (HCC) faculty and secondary teachers from the Washington County Public School (WCPS) System. The conference began with a vision in the HCC Faculty Assembly, was planned and implemented by a steering committee of faculty and staff from HCC and the secondary discipline supervisors from WCPS and involved over 1100 educators in a collaborative program of over 25 discipline-based sessions on the HCC campus. The infrastructure and organization developed for this project will serve as a foundation for providing a connected and smooth continuum of educational resources from middle school through the baccalaureate degree. Representatives of the steering committee from both the college and the secondary school disciplines will present the theoretical, logistical, and practical aspects of this conference and its implications.

Background

The Beginning

We have all witnessed "flavor of the month" educational trends that generate much heat and little light. This is not one of them. This is a concrete action plan to combine the teaching talents and resources of the Washington County Public Schools and Hagerstown Community College for the mutual benefit of our students. It takes the concept of "*learning community*" from Terry O'Banion[1] as a "curricular intervention designed to enhance collaboration and expand learning" and translates it into the reality of a teacher-to-teacher initiative with a spirit of shared service, knowledge, and capital holdings. It began in the Faculty Assembly at Hagerstown Community College. Following a divisive reorganization, the faculty decided to heal themselves by working together to define and make real a unique learning community that would be a turning point for the educational system in Washington County.

Related Initiatives

The learning revolution of the 1990s has created a wave of initiatives in education, all in the name of putting student learning first and making institutions more learner-centered. These initiatives all incorporate the word "learning" in their name which creates some confusion. In addition to learning communities, there are learning organizations[2], learning-centered institutions[3] and learning colleges[4]. Can the implementation of these initiatives make a difference?

HCC defines itself by five core values: *deeply supported and broadly endorsed beliefs about what is important to us.* The institutional commitment to learning community is articulated in **Core Value #1**: *HCC is an institution whose focus is on students and the quality of student learning. As a learner centered college, the faculty and staff of HCC will concentrate resources on the learning needs of our students and our community through its programs, policies, and practices.* Although there was never any disagreement from any college segment with the ideals

and sincerity of this core value, there was much cynicism and debate on its translation into reality. The faculty wanted to come up with a plan that all segments of the college would support and which would bring quantifiable changes in the quality of thinking, cooperation, and decision making within the college, the larger educational community, and culture in which we exist.

The state of Maryland is committed to another learning initiative, the K-16 Partnership[5] which has much in common with our Learning Community initiative. The K-16 Partnership is an alliance of the Maryland State Department of Education (K-12), the Maryland Higher Education Commission (13-16), and the University System of Maryland. The mission of this continuum of resources is to develop strategies for strengthening K-16 connections, standards, competencies, assessments, professional development of educators, and community engagement in educational activities. The nitty-gritty implementation of these goals however, is several layers removed from the trenches where the teachers and students live. The vision we had for our learning community would make teachers a major force in identifying and eliminating some of the "disconnects" that slow down or impede students as they move along the K-16 continuum and gradually evolve into learned citizens.

There is no shortage of statistics[6] and studies[7] which support the need for increasing the synergism and decreasing the disconnects along the continuum. The increasing demands of a technology-based economy require a more educated labor force. A statement from the National Association of System Heads (NASH) presents a simple idea to articulate the urgency of moving more students along the full length of the K-16 continuum. "Our nation is no longer well served by an education system that prepares a few to attend college to develop their minds for learned pursuits while the rest are expected only to build their muscles for useful labor. In the 21st century, all students must meet higher achievement standards in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools and thus be better prepared for the challenges of work and citizenship"[5].

Establishing Support Within the Educational Community

The HCC Faculty

It was important to recruit the faculty and establish the value and enobling quality of taking this type of risk. This meant asking a group of very talented but overworked and overwhelmed colleagues to find time and energy for what many might see as another initiative that would fizzle in the frantic rush of a busy semester and the frustrations of mindless bureaucracy. This particular initiative was especially risky because it went off campus and involved the largest group of educated people in the community at large—the public school teachers. If we could not deliver a real learning community, the failure would reinforce any negative stereotypes they might have about community colleges and our students. Nevertheless, a formal initiative was drawn up that proposed five specific goals and established guidelines for a working relationship between HCC faculty and the WCPS secondary teachers. From this came our working definition of the learning community we envisioned: *a community of scholars and their students learning from and with one another.* The five goals identified in the original proposal were to establish:

1. A collaborative professional development activity for all teachers from high school through HCC to be hosted by HCC at the start of the 1999-2000 academic year which would provide a vehicle for the two faculties to work together to build an organization of ongoing mutual support,
2. A teacher-teacher communication network,
3. A student-student (WCPS-HCC) communication network with joint supervised study,
4. A faculty-faculty (WCPS-HCC) team to meet and work on placement testing, problems

with the Student Outcomes Assessment Report (SOAR), and developmental education at HCC, and

5. Curriculum-based projects involving both HCC and WCPS faculty and students (specific suggestions included dual enrollment classes, special topic workshops, guided tours of battlefields, leadership training and academies).

The College Administration and Board of Education

This proposal was officially endorsed by the president of the college and formally accepted by the Board of Trustees before being taken to the senior executive level of the Washington County Board of Education (WCBOE). With this endorsement came some financial resources for anticipated expenses. The college president also suggested and secured a commitment to deliver the keynote address from Dr. Donald Langenburg, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland and architect of the K-16 initiative. After endorsement by the WCPS Director of Support Services, Director of Curriculum, and the Deputy Superintendent of Schools, the proposed event was scheduled for August 25, 1999. The HCC Faculty Assembly chair was sponsored to the agenda of school principals where he gained their support for meeting with the secondary discipline supervisors. The principals saw this proposed conference as an opportunity to address concerns about the SOAR which reports placement test data for WCPS graduates attending HCC. Support for the professional conference described in the Faculty Assembly proposal was accepted with the request that it be scheduled in the morning, that middle school teachers be included, and that the college facilities be available for use by the secondary supervisors for their own curriculum sessions in the afternoon. There was a great deal of concern that teachers would not be very supportive of yet another meeting during the busy days when they are trying to prepare for the arrival of students. This increased the stakes for making the conference something that everyone felt was a valuable use of their precious time. The addition of the middle school teachers doubled the numbers attending and added another perspective to be considered when planning the program.

Planning: The Practical Really Matters

This was an event that required active listening and overplanning. We did not want to bring 1100 teachers to our campus and waste their time and/or make ourselves look foolish. We knew this would be a huge undertaking that could be unraveled by something as simple as inefficiency in the delivery of lunch or a keynote speaker with the wrong message. As we moved through the planning stages, important lessons were learned and noted for future conferences: 1. Make the needs of the WCPS teachers the first priority for the conference and develop their trust, 2. Assume all risk in the development of the content, 3. Refuse to believe those who say it will never work, 4. Ignore those who ask "what's in it for me?" and 5. Expect efforts to sabotage the focus of the activity.

Steering Committee Membership

A subcommittee of the Faculty Assembly made up of the division chairs and interested faculty with ideas and energy met twice to develop a preliminary plan and vision for the conference. This concept was presented to a combined group of HCC Faculty Assembly subcommittee and the WCPS secondary discipline supervisors, which became the *Steering Committee*. It was impossible to bring classroom teachers directly into the planning stages because of scheduling conflicts with their teaching responsibilities. At this writing, Steering Committee membership includes the president of the Washington County Teachers' Association, a classroom teacher on release time who is available during the day when meetings are held.

The Schedule of Conference Events

The first *preliminary* schedule was drafted by the HCC Faculty Assembly subcommittee and modified at the first meeting of the full Steering Committee as follows:

Final Schedule for August 25, 1999

7:30-8:30 a.m.	Breakfast and Registration	
8:30- 8:45 a.m.	*Welcome*	President, Hagerstown Community College Superintendent, Washington County Public Schools
8:45- 9:20 a.m.	*A Continuum of Learning: From Middle School through Baccalaureate Degree*	Chancellor, University System of Maryland
9:20- 9:30 a.m.	*From This Day Forward*	Faculty Assembly Chair, HCC
9:30- 9:45 a.m.	Travel Time (transportation available for disabled persons)	
9:45-12:00 p.m.	Breakout by discipline and Learning Resource Center tours by discipline	
12:00 p.m.	Lunch hosted by HCC at discipline sites	
1:00 p.m.	Discipline sessions for WCPS teachers planned by supervisors. HCC faculty welcome	
2:15 –2:30 p.m.	Break – Refreshments	
2:30-3:30 p.m.	Afternoon sessions continue	
3:30 p.m.	Optional Tour of HCC Campus	

The Steering Committee Meetings

The first meeting of the full Steering Committee was very productive. In addition to tweaking the schedule, expectations for the conference were discussed, a theme was identified (Creating a Learning Community) and there was a brainstorming session on logistics. Each secondary supervisor was paired with an HCC counterpart for the purpose of collaborating on the design of breakout sessions by discipline that would be useful to the secondary teachers. The full Steering Committee met about every other month. The WCPS Director of Curriculum and the HCC Faculty Assembly Chair provided liason between meetings. Separate meetings between HCC-WCPS counterparts were scheduled as needed. This event did not succeed by accident. It required a lot of directed energy and inspiration.

Planning the Breakout Sessions

Secondary supervisors are the instrumental group in establishing rapport and credibility with the public school faculties. The need to listen to their concerns and suggestions cannot be emphasized enough. Matching a college academic discipline with a corresponding secondary discipline was challenging but *it is essential to find a way for all to participate*. The product of the discipline planning meetings was a preliminary program including all segments of the college as host presenters. The discipline-based breakout sessions that were organized for this conference were:

1. Behavioral and Social Sciences/History
2. Business and Technology
3. English and Reading
4. Foreign Languages
5. Health Sciences and Physical Education
6. Mathematics
7. Music and Art
8. Science
9. Counselors
10. Library

It was critical to determine the size of each discipline breakout session so room assignments could be made and adjustments made if necessary. The program for each breakout session evolved differently. In Science there were hands-on laboratory sessions and demonstrations. Business and Technology included sessions on Technology Education, Computer Programming trends, Application Software, Internships, Agriculture and more. The Behavioral and Social Sciences menu included sessions such as *Building a Baby's Brain* and *Learned Optimism*. College faculty tried to make sure that the content was substantial and useful. The WCPS counselors had a hands-on work session in a college computer lab with HCC academic advisors to learn how to use the Articulation System (ARTSYS) network for advising students and learning about courses at Maryland Universities and Colleges. The only way to determine what was useful was to listen to the discipline supervisors.

Logistics: How to Get The Job Done

*Over*plan

The need to articulate the vision for this initiative to all college segments is essential to forge a successful team-spirited approach. We sent a communication inviting ALL college personnel to form a team with the diverse talents needed to execute the many specific tasks involved in the delivery of this conference. The Faculty Assembly chair put together a meticulous list of tasks that started with "Who will direct traffic flow onto and through the campus in the morning and ended with "Who will contact the County Sheriff to secure Robinwood drive for volume outflow at 3:30 p.m.". This list of "who will..." questions addressed all anticipated tasks: handicapped transportation, stuffing the bags of materials, setting up the registration tables, escorting the conferees to the breakout sessions, stocking the rest rooms with paper, directing tours through the Learning Resource Center (LRC), printing library card/nametags and much, more more. The campus-wide response to this invitation brought together a team of inspired workers from administration, faculty, and staff with expertise and energy that introduced many HCC employees to each other in a whole new context. Overplanning was the underlying secret to pulling it all together and it worked.

Corporate Sponsors

The bottom line is always a concern when doing anything at HCC. We were reluctant to be extravagant and we had to put first things first. We needed nametags but did we need double pocket nametag holders with lanyards for every participant? We needed lunches but did we need an afternoon snack also? We decided to recruit corporate sponsors for the unique nametag holders, lanyards, and extra snack items. We were immediately successful. Allegheny Power provided funding for the lanyards with their logo imprinted and for the double-pocket nametag holders that are described below. Coca-cola provided the drinks served to 1100 participants at seven locations during the afternoon sessions. We learned that there is public support for education in our community and that corporate sponsors buy a lot of good will. We will expand on this for our next conference.

Special Touches

The Program Booklet

The HCC Printing and Graphic Specialist designed the program booklet, nametags, and posters. Material in the booklet included a letter to all Washington County Educators from the Steering Committee, a full agenda for the day, a separate page of events for each discipline group,

information about services available in the William M. Brish Library and maps of the LRC. We tried to make the program easy to follow and consistent from discipline to discipline. A sample copy of the program is available from any of the authors.

The Lighthouse

The Faculty Assembly chair chose a lighthouse to capture the vision of our Learning Community. It became a symbol of the light that educators provide for students trying to find their way through uncharted waters in life. The lighthouse imagery was used on posters, the program, the souvenir coffee mugs, and the nametags. The lighthouse theme also provided the inspiration for the send-off message, *From This Day Forward*[8], given to all teachers as they left the Opening Session for their breakout locations. Copies of this address are available upon request.

Examples of Overplanning

Registration

Because we acquired the names of most participants in advance of the conference, all nametags were printed and arranged alphabetically on tables in the lobby of the HCC Athletic Recreation Conference Center (ARCC) where the Opening Session was scheduled. The nametags were color-coded for HCC faculty, WCPS teachers, and HCC staff. All staff were invited to help and volunteers were enthusiastic and ubiquitous. Every secondary teacher was given an HCC bag containing a conference program, a lighthouse Learning Community coffee mug, an HCC pencil, notepad, and newsletter published for high school seniors about our college. One thousand of these bags were stuffed the previous afternoon by a volunteer team from all college segments.

Box Lunches and Other Meals

Box lunches were chosen for two reasons: 1. They could be served at many different locations simultaneously to many participants. This avoided long serving lines and 2. Participants could find their own place on our lovely campus to enjoy the gardens and explore the facilities. A sub-committee decided on the menu and solicited bids. Each lunch included: a sandwich containing a minimum of three ounces of either ham, turkey or roast beef served on a Kaiser roll with one each individual package of mayonnaise, mustard, salt, and pepper. Each box also contained: a separate package of lettuce and tomato, two six ounce servings of either cole slaw and potato salad or cole slaw and pasta salad served in individual sealed containers, one

commercially wrapped bag (1 oz) of potato chips, a fresh three ounce brownie, one "Gala" apple, a cold soft drink (National brand), a napkin and a spoon or fork. Vegetarian lunches were also available. *The lunches were extremely well received* and cost about four dollars each. Donuts and coffee were available during registration and soft drinks were served midway through the afternoon.

Library Cards and Nametags

Because HCC has just completed the construction of a state-of-the-art Learning Resource Center which includes a new library, we gave each secondary teacher a library card to use this facility freely. We wanted to encourage all scholars in this community to become familiar with this campus and use our resources to stay renewed and enthusiastic about learning. The library card was imprinted to serve double duty as a nametag for the conference. The library card/name tag was inserted over a color-coded card with the conference lighthouse logo into a plastic holder with two pockets. We had to search creatively to find the plastic holders that we wanted and found them at: Laser Registration, 4200 Street Laurent Blvd, Suite 1110, Montreal, QC, Canada H2W 2R2 (cost = .40 ea). Lanyards imprinted with the logo of the corporate sponsor were obtained (cost = $1.00 ea) from Jeff Martin Specialties, 120903 Hopewell Blvd, Hagerstown, MD 21742.

Evaluations and Momentum

Evaluation and Feedback

Two separate evaluation forms were designed: The first was to evaluate the general effectiveness of the conference, common events to all disciplines (registration, speakers, tour of the LRC, lunch) and breakout sessions. The second form was discipline specific and included an opportunity for participants to suggest follow-up activities. About 450 general evaluation forms were returned and a summary of the results follows:

Summary of General Evaluations

Percent of total responses

	poor 1	2	3	4	outstanding 5	n
Registration and overall organization of conference	2	5	11	28	54	457
Keynote speaker	6	15	37	24	18	453
Tour of LRC (construction not completed at the time of the conference as we hoped it would be)	30	18	28	16	8	425
First Breakout session	3	6	29	33	27	401
Second Breakout session (availability varied with the disciplines)	10	3	13	27	47	92
Lunch	1	3	10	35	50	337
General Effectiveness of the collaborative Effort	5	8	21	44	22	395

Of the more than 500 specifically transcribed *comments* on the general and discipline-specific feedback forms, 67% were superlative or laudatory, 15% were positive, 12% were positive with suggestions for improvement, and 6% were critical or negative. Of the negative responses, most criticized: 1. scheduling the conference at such a busy time immediately preceding school opening and 2. the inclusion of the LRC tour when the construction phase was significantly behind schedule leaving much to the imagination. For many WCPS teachers it was their *first visit* to the HCC campus and their first opportunity to meet and compare notes and strategies with our

faculty and staff. Many comments reflected an expectation for a second annual conference and gave suggestions on how to continue building this learning community that had been so successfully created.

Building on the Momentum

The Steering Committee met again in September to discuss a series of collaborative initiatives that would take advantage of the relationships established during the conference in August. Significantly, by the date of this first meeting, many opportunities to work together had already been taken spontaneously without any directives. Specifically suggested by the Steering Committee as collaborative projects that would continue to promote the development of a smooth transition for students from WCPS to HCC to upper division institutions were:

- Reverse hosting of the 2nd conference with the WCPS in the Fall 2000. This would involve several high school/middle school sites to accommodate the disciplines because no one facility would be large enough for the conference as it was delivered at HCC.

- Invite HCC faculty to participate in the Convocation for WCPS teachers instead of having a separate convocation/keynote address.

- Schedule the WCPS New Teacher Orientation at HCC (Fall 2000) so they will be able to meet the HCC faculty and see the campus.

- Design a Learning Communities Lecture Series in the HCC Kepler Theatre at HCC in different disciplines that would be attended by the college community, WCPS secondary students, and the community-at-large.

- Design individual discipline projects on which HCC and WCPS faculty can work together.
  Articulation agreements in several disciplines are in urgent need of updating
  Placement testing is another area of ongoing concern
  Identify courses for **dual enrollment** initiatives in all disciplines. Tuition reduction for students in dual enrollment courses has already been approved.
  Work together on Academy initiatives

- Try some teacher exchanges, e-mail networking

- Expand the Learning Community to include the full K-16 continuum by involving other additional higher education institutions in Washington County: Frostburg State, University System of Maryland, and Hagerstown Business College.

Epilogue

We knew from the beginning that the first annual professional development conference of WCPS and HCC faculties, *Creating a Learning Community*, was only the first step in a long collaborative process. It was a huge step and exceeded our goal of establishing interinstitutional teacher-teacher communication and collaboration. Significantly, it also expanded interdisciplinary and teacher-staff communication and collaboration at HCC. But **the main thing** is that we identified a common agenda that will focus our collective light on providing the students of Washington County with a more direct path to higher education and the wisdom and skills they need to build successful lives.

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